

THE CHRISTMAS EVE DANCE.

By Joan Frederick Gels.

CHAPTER I.

"I don't see why you girls don't want Mr. Nittach. I'm sure that he plays the 'Beautiful Blue Danube' most beautifully."

Judith had come in from the kitchen where she was making fudge for the girls to eat with their crackers and chocolate.

"Boh!" answered Caroline. "You know as well as we do that Mr. Nittach can't play a two-step any better than a Tennessee fiddler. Of course, his Blue Danube is all right. He's been playing it for fifty years."

The other girls snickered. Caroline's folks had sent her to school in the east, and upon her return she had introduced the two-step. "It's the thing," she had said. "Why, they don't even dance the waltz in Chicago any more." Now she was urging the girls of the Guild to displace Mr. Nittach, the village musician, with a cousin of her's, who knew "all the latest two-steps published."

"But it's not right to put aside poor, old Mr. Nittach. He's played at every one of our Guild affairs and especially at every one of our Christmas eve dances, and he ought to play at this one," Judith persisted. "You know, girls, he has tried so very hard to oblige us in everything. He has bought the latest waltzes, sending to Chicago for them, and he has even tried the two-step."

"Yes, tried," answered Caroline. "But he's never succeeded."

"I don't care," said Judith, angrily. "He's a dear old man, and he's always doing something for us. If it isn't flowers for us in the summer, it's wine for our mothers in the winter. And if we didn't make much at our barn dances and ice cream festivals he was always willing to take half pay. You all know that he taught our mothers music lessons and us music, and I hope he will teach our children music."

The girls laughed until the tears rolled down their pretty cheeks, but they applauded, too; and Judith had won the day. Mr. Nittach was to be asked to play the violin at the Guild's Christmas eve dance. The girls delegated Judith and Caroline a committee to request the services of Mr. Nittach for the occasion mentioned. Caroline refused to serve. "If it isn't going to be Tom," she said—Tom was her cousin—"why, I won't have anything to do with inviting old Nittach—the old Dutchman."

"But it will be Tom, anyhow, for he can play the two-step. I'll fix it," she ended.

The girls ate their crackers and fudge and drank their chocolate. Judith was rather silent. She was not a little ashamed of her speech. But when the girls had gone she went into the kitchen where her mother sat knitting, and declared that she was glad the girls had been so kind to poor Mr. Nittach. "And I know the most of them do love the two-step," she told her mother with a sigh.

She went to the window and looked out. "I hope we will have sleighing for Christmas," she thought. "The roads are nothing but mud now. Dear me! Christmas is so near. I must go down to-morrow and see Mr. Nittach. Looks like snow flakes, mother," she said aloud, as she turned from the window to light the lamp.

When she arose the next morning Judith melted the frost upon the window pane with her breath, and peering through the glass saw that

"The snow had begun in the gloaming, and silently all the night. Had been heaping field and highway with a mantle cold and white."

Her first thought was of Mr. Nittach. She must get word to him. Scarcely had breakfast been eaten than the jingling of bells announced the presence of the butcher from Oconoville.

"Well, I want to tell you," shouted the butcher, as he stepped into the kitchen. "Lakefield's a great place, a great place in a snow storm. Might have lost my bearings if it hadn't been for the nag."

"Oh, you keep quiet," said Mrs. Warner, as she prudently weighed the meat he had brought in. "You was born and brought up in Lakefield and your mother afore you."

"That's right, auntie," he said with a smile and a look at Judith. "And I hope my children will be."

"Pshaw," said Judith, getting very red in the face. "Where'd you hear that?"

"I was just down to the mill. The folks there was laughing over it. I thought you was going to be an old maid, Jude."

"I am," said Judith, shortly.

"Not if I know it," he said. "Say! How'd you like to ride over to Mr. Nittach's with me now?"

"Well, I hadn't ought to, but it's the only chance I have to-day, and it's better than nothing."

"Don't mention it," replied the butcher sarcastically.

Leaving her mother to clear the breakfast table, and with many admonitions to "not" Judith rode off beside the jolly butcher in the sleigh. The village was quickly passed, and turning his nag down beside the musician's gate, Mr. Nittach was just emerging from the door of the little white house. He was a little, round fellow himself, and his buzz cut and enormous red muffer brought under the arms, the neck and tied behind his back, made him appear smaller than ever. His face was smoothly shaved, his chin as prominent as that of Punch, and his little eyes bright as the scarlet tings which adorned his cheeks and nose.

"Hello," he said. "Was on the look-out for you. I am out of fresh meat."

"Who's dat mit you?" Judith shivered.

class. He did his own calling out. "Balance to women." "Swing your partner." "Swing all." He would call out, in jolly, mocking tones. "Allan! left," he called. Suddenly he stopped.

"Judith—Judith Warner," he said, and William. "You hat not done right. Now once more!"

The dancers shrieked with laughter. "Oh, Jude!" the girls cried. "Hey Bill," shouted the boys, "your left foot's lazy."

The dance finished, the dancers made for the lemonade well. The violin soon called them to the waltz. Next it was the quadrille then a waltz, then a lancers.

"It's time we had a two-step," said Caroline. "Play a two-step, Mr. Nittach, please."

"If I please you, my dear," cried all the girls, but Judith.

Mr. Nittach struck up the "Washington Post." For a few bars he got along famously. Then he unconsciously swung into the waltz time. Now the dancers stopped. "Wrong, wrong, Mr. Nittach," they shouted. "It was the first time in his life that his partner had been questioned. His simple pride was hurt, and his voice quavered."

"It had not value so much in my hand," he said with a pale smile. He tried the two-step again, and again for a few bars he played finely. But once more he swung into the waltz. Caroline and two of her cronies and the other girls took their seats. The old gentleman noticed that, and by an effort got back to the two-step. A moment later, however, he fell into the waltz, and the girls of the waltz, and dropped his hands.

"I cannot play dat two-step," he said dejectedly.

"Tom! said Caroline, peremptorily. "You play dat two-step, Mr. Nittach, please."

They danced to Tom's music. Judith brought Mr. Nittach some lemonade. "I will der lancers and der quadrille and der waltz," he told her. He played the quadrille admirably. When the young folks had rested from the dance, he started to tune up for the waltz. But Caroline and a number of the girls directed Tom to play the two-step. The older musician stopped, bewildered.

Judith walked swiftly to the centre of the room.

"I was placed in charge of this dance," she said vehemently. "I am the President of this Guild. I hired Mr. Nittach to play, and he is going to play." The dancers were awed. Even Caroline was a trifle taken a-back.

Mr. Nittach played the waltz. Not more than half of the young people danced. When he had finished a dozen voices shouted for Tom, and the two-step. Caroline was going among the girls, coupling "Judith" and "would be boys."

"The next dance on the programme," Judith announced, "will be a lancers."

She and William took their place to make up the best of the waltz. Mr. Nittach had been busy with his music, and called out "ready" without glancing up. He began to play. Then he looked around. Only Judith, glancing indignantly at her fellow members of the Guild, and William, looking a bit shame-faced, were on the floor.

"Are you not to dance?" queried the musician. "Is it a mistake made? Is it a value?"

"Yes," said Judith, seizing the opportunity and attempting to cover her retreat. "I will der Beautiful Blue Danube."

He played with great zeal. The pleasures of other years, when he had played the waltz for the waltz, Mr. Nittach had been busy with his music, and called out "ready" without glancing up. He began to play. Then he looked around. Only Judith, glancing indignantly at her fellow members of the Guild, and William, looking a bit shame-faced, were on the floor.

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The International Sunday School Lesson

December 17, 1899. Malachi III 13: IV 4.

Fruits of Right and Wrong Doing.

This is a dark picture of the church four hundred years before Christ. It is composed of a host of rumberlers. They murmur against the government of God. They are dominated by the spirit of practical atheism. Yet their words are bold and presumptuous. They say "Wherein have we spoken against God?" The prophet accepts their ironical challenge, and answers, "Ye have said, 'It is vain to serve God.' It is the old cry of 'What is the profit?' with the infection which suggests and anticipates the answer, 'None!'"

"What have we to show for having kept the ordinances and wearing mourning garments? The proud (the openly impious) are in better state than we. They are advanced in honor. Those who invite the judgments of God by their defiance escape unharmed." It is the church of the Unholy Grumblers. But happily there is a church within the church. The prophet proceeds to describe it. It is composed of those who hold God in loving reverence. They meet at intervals for religious converse, for mutual strengthening and edification. God, who seems to take no notice of the wicked, makes a record of the good for His and think upon His name. In the day of final accounting He will esteem them as His portion. In that day it will be clearly seen that there is a difference between the good and the evil. A day of wrath is in store for the wicked. Their destruction shall be as complete as the burning of the chaff for the brush-heaps. But to the "church within the church," the Lord's coming will be like the sunrise. In the poet's fancy the beams of the sun are like the wings of angels, with which God appears for the relief of His people. "Gambolling calves" and "treading the wicked like asbes" are the orientalisms which the prophet uses to describe the joy of the righteous. The paragraph closes with an injunction to an observance of the Mosaic law, a prophecy of a "forerunner," with an outline of his mission, namely, to turn degenerate descendants back to the faith of their fathers.

The Teacher's Lantern.

(1.)—It is the waving of society that in times of general degeneracy, there is always a select remnant who remain good and true. God had seven thousand who had not bent the knee to Baal, though the prophet did not know it.

(2.)—The "book of remembrance" is a figure of speech taken for custom of the times. God is represented as doing what an oriental monarch did when he directed his scribe to record the name of one who had been loyal in an emergency.

(3.)—The "books" mentioned in John's Revelation, are divine omens of the times. They will be found to tally.

(4.)—The unequal lots of the righteous and the wicked in the present world call for a day of equalization.

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It was the last straw.

The strangers from the Inn were shouting a loud good night and a "merry Christmas" to the host as they stumbled across the sill, when they halted suddenly at the sight of the violin.

"It is old Nittach," they said. "No one else could play the 'Blue Danube' like that. But why is he playing outside here? He ought to be in the school."

"Maybe he's serenading his girl," suggested one.

"They went their way with loud laughter. But the inn-keeper braved the terrible cold, and listened.

"I never heard him play like that," he said. "Seems as though he's in the church yard."

At that point where the waltz grows most tender the music stopped abruptly. "Guess he found it too cold to play," thought the inn-keeper, almost regretfully, as he went indoors, and drank two hot whiskeys, one after the other, "to the memory of other days."

In the morning Judith and William, on their way to service through the church yard, came upon the old musician. He was sitting beside a headstone upon which were graven these words:

In memory of GRETCHEN, Wife of Herman Nittach. Died December 1879. "Peace on earth, good will toward all men."

He was quite cold, but a sweet smile lingered about the corners of his mouth made his face warm and life-like. One arm lay casually over his violin, half hidden in the snow.

And the strings of the violin were snapped in twain.

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